

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In today's Gospel reading, we are confronted with another in a series of encounters with prospective disciples in John (including Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman). Here the issue is *seeing rightly*. We know that *signs* are important in this gospel. As a sign that Jesus is the light of the world, an idea going back to the Prologue ("What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world...the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world."), Jesus gives sight to a man born blind even though he does not even ask to be healed. And what we learn in this story is that no matter how tragic actual physical blindness is, spiritual blindness is worse. It is total darkness.

In John's Gospel, the text is much more philosophical than it is in the Synoptics, and the philosophical discussions are long. This is particularly true of this account; notice, for example, the relatively complex exchanges between the Pharisees and Jesus. The debate concerns the question of whether or not the sins of the parents are visited upon the child, and the answer to that question is not simple; it requires fairly extensive commentary. This actually takes us back to *the wisdom tradition* in the Bible in which "prosperity and health are indications of righteousness and illness and poverty are indications of sin" as seen for example, in the Book of Job. But Jesus does not accept the premise and instead chooses to view illness as an occasion to do God's work in the world.

In John, Jesus visits Jerusalem three times, whereas in Matthew, Mark and Luke, he visits the city just once. And the places referred to in the narrative, are real places: the scene is not in the Temple itself, but at the Pool of Siloam lying toward the southwest wall of the ancient city. The pool was built by King Hezekiah to bring water to the city when it was under siege by the Assyrians. Jesus meets the blind man here, and the scene is occurring in the context of the Jewish celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles.

If the disciples come to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God gradually over time in the Synoptic accounts, in John's version they know this from the very beginning. The metaphors accumulating throughout the account make this abundantly clear. Jesus at various points says that he is the *bread of life*, the *gate*, the *good shepherd*, the *resurrection and the life*, the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*, and the *light of the world*. The latter is a powerful symbolic description of Jesus, but its power does not guarantee that the idea itself is easily understood.

John intends us to see the action here as "one of the moments in the gospel when God's truth and the world's life come rushing together into one" when Jesus heals the man blind since birth. What price do we pay for adhering to an outmoded view of sin when it conflicts with an obvious good? Because what we are witnessing here is the two-way power of fear, acted out as the Pharisees and the parents of the man born blind. How do they view what has occurred? How much of that view is determined by the values they've brought to the event rather than a clear-eyed view of what has transpired?

The problem the Pharisees had with Jesus forming a paste of spit and dirt with which to heal the blind man was that it appeared to contravene one of the 39 forbidden tasks on the Sabbath; the Torah forbade kneading (as in kneading dough). They couldn't let that go without commentary. Jesus challenges not only "the common perception of suffering as a direct result of sin." He also challenges the thinking that sinfulness is "directly related to obeying the sabbath law." Jesus is arguing that we have to give up the kind of thinking that views the world as a kind of giant "moral slot-machine" that dispenses good or evil outcomes on the basis of what inputs are inserted. And he challenges the thinking "that neither God nor the righteous (in this case, the Pharisees) should listen to sinners." Sin is not primarily the presence of illness in a person. It is not primarily a violation of the Law. Sin is *resisting Jesus*. Thus, what we have here is a passage "working to undermine simplistic understandings of sin." After all, following or resisting Jesus is not a simple matter, as evidenced by the number of times people in John's account are unable to achieve true discipleship. And the unavoidable reality for the critics of Jesus remains this: how could he perform such a healing if he is a sinner?

The Pharisees couldn't deny that a miracle had taken place. Yet the one who had performed the miracle was violating the Sabbath rule. This meant that the old paradigm was being challenged. They either had to make a change in their understanding of what was permitted on the Sabbath or deny that a miracle had taken place against the testimony of everyone who had witnessed it. And the story points up the puzzle of a joyous event (the healing) being responsible for a lot of turmoil. How does such good news produce so much pain?

And this is a story about grace. The turning point may well be when the blind man "confesses his faith as a result of his new-found sight." John Newton, the slave trader turned abolitionist, who in the late 18th century wrote the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace," said he was inspired by the blind man's confession in this famous story ("*One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*").

The quality of grace can be seen as growing out of the actual lived experience of the people for whom John's gospel was written. That is, it may suggest the experience of being ejected from the synagogues toward the end of the first century. Their expulsion would have resulted from their confession of faith in Jesus which offended the more traditional Jews. When John uses the term "the Jews," we believe he has in mind those who ejected the followers of Jesus from the synagogues, certainly not all Jews

One of the things this story makes clear is that although the ancient world did not ordinarily have a problem with miracle stories, here the issue was that the miracle was attributed to Jesus. And this has to do with the absence of Jesus from the scene where the man being healed is interrogated by different parties. This was not only a description of events vital to the telling of the story, it would have been true of Jesus' actual absence from the community after the Ascension. John's community did not have Jesus physically present. The community of the faithful described by John is *living in* this world but is not of this world. This Johannine community was coming to grips with the fact that there was a widening gap

between the present time of the community and the past time of the earthly Jesus. This was a second and third generation faith community separated in time and space from the historical Jesus.

There is a basic crisis of faith being depicted in this story. On the one hand, the crisis arising out of “the miraculous healing (that) finds the blind man openly confessing Jesus and worshiping him.” And this is appropriate; his decision and response are even validated in that he is free of sin and healthy. On the other hand, “the Jews” (again, a term which here refers to those traditional Jews who were expelling the followers of Jesus from their synagogues toward the end of the first century) and the Pharisees are increasingly seen here as failing to respond to the situation with faith.” Thus, they are depicted as “spiritually blind and full of sin.” Beyond this, however, what is happening here is that a conflict between the followers of Jesus and the so-called “Jews” is growing, and it is pointing toward a future in which the two sides will find themselves at loggerheads, and that points us in the direction of the coming Passion of Our Lord which we will recall on Palm Sunday and throughout Holy Week.

“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light --- for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says,

‘Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,

And Christ will shine on you’.”

Ephesians 5: 8-14

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Sources: Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, vol. 1, SPCK, London, 2002; Jirair Tashjian, “Fourth Sunday in Lent,” *The Voice, Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*, Christian Resource Institute, 2020; Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 9: 1-41,” www.workingpreacher.org 2011; Carl Gregg, “Lectionary Commentary: ‘Ray Charles and John 9 --- Seeing for the First Time,’” www.patheos.com, 2011; Brian Stoffregen, “John 9: 1-41, Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year A.” www.crossmarks.com, Mark F. Whitters, “Discipleship in John: Four Profiles,” *Word & World*, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 1998; Gracia Grindal, “New Sight, New Life: Lenten Gospels,” *Word & World*, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN; Edward F. Markquart, “Jesus and the Man Born Blind,” www.sermonsfromseattle.com, www.sermonsuite.com ; Alyce McKenzie, “Jesus, the Blind Man, and Spiritual Vision: Reflections on John 9: 1-41,” www.patheos.com 2011; George Hermanson, “John 9: 1-41,” www.holytextures.com ,2011; Mark A. Matson, *John*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2002, *Interpretation Bible Studies*)